

Mississippi River Commission tours the area

By Liz Anderson

A contingent of Mississippi County residents addressed the Mississippi River Commission Monday during their "high water" inspection trip which began with a public hearing in Cape Girardeau, "rode the boat" south to Cairo, then the commissioners piled into vans for a tour of the St. Johns Bayou/New Madrid Floodway flood control project.

First stop was the Susanna Wesley Family Learning Center in East Prairie, where Lynn Bock, attorney for the St. Johns Levee and Drainage District, sponsoring agency for the flood control project, explained that the St. Johns project has been on the books since the 1950s, and the need for it is greater today than it was in 1954.

He said we are now in an appeal process with the Missouri Department of Natural Resources (DNR), appealing the DNR's denial of a Water Quality Certification permit for the project before the Clean Water Commission.

The DNR denied the permit last November, saying they needed clarification on what the Corps would do with Big Oak Tree State Park, and that all federal agencies had not agreed on mitigation for the project, a condition they had demanded.

While the appeal process is continuing, and a hearing has been set for June 3-6, the Corps of Engineers is also continuing to negotiate with the DNR, attempting to reach a settlement before the hearing, according to Bock.

Jim Robinson, Jr., of Pinhook, addressed the commission, asking them to give his small rural town the same luxury as more urban areas have -- freedom from floodwater.

Larry Sharpe, project manager for the St. Johns project with the Corps, Memphis District, said that even through Pinhook is miles away from the "gap", Mr. Robinson won't plant corn this spring because of the possibility of backwater flooding.

He will wait and plant soybeans when he feels the risk of flooding is gone.

Martha Ellen Black, executive director of the Susanna Wesley Family Learning Center and director of the East Prairie Enterprise Community, explained that her assistant, Mary Robinson, has worked with the center for 11 years. She can't come to work when the backwater flooding is in without riding on a tractor.

The former president of the East Prairie Chamber of Commerce works at Noranda and has to drive 40 miles

out of the way to get there when the river is up.

Legal services, ambulance services, everything, is disrupted when the flooding happens.

She said it is not a matter of flooding farmland, although crops are critical to the economy of the region. "It is the way people have to live. We're not supposed to be living that way," she added.

She said she was in the Peace Corps in the late 1970s, on the island of Granada, a primitive Third World country, and the situation here is not very different from conditions there, she said. One-third of the people live in poverty.

Roads have to be open. Many people live here and work elsewhere and have to be able to drive to get to work. "We have to be mobile within our area and we don't have that mobility."

Following the meeting in East Prairie, the MRC toured the floodway, including Ten Mile Pond, Pinhook, Big Oak Tree State Park, the floodway closure and pumping station location, the St. Johns outlet and pumping station, and then New Madrid, before continuing on to the second public hearing in Memphis Tuesday morning.